

## WP16–15 Executive Summary

<b>General Description</b>	<p>Proposal WP16-15 seeks to increase the harvest quota for caribou in a portion of Unit 7 from five caribou to ten caribou with five animals for the community of Hope and five for the community of Cooper Landing by Federal registration permit. <i>Submitted by the Hope Village Council.</i></p>
<b>Proposed Regulation</b>	<p><b>Unit 7- Caribou</b></p> <p><i>Unit 7 – north of the Sterling Highway and Aug. 10–Dec. 31 west of the Seward Highway – 1 caribou by Federal registration permit only. The Seward District Ranger will close the Federal season when 5 caribou are harvested by <del>Federal registration permit</del>. Hope subsistence users and 5 caribou are harvested from Cooper Landing subsistence users by Federal registration permit.</i></p> <p><i>Unit 7- remainder</i></p> <p><i>No Federal open season</i></p>
<b>OSM Conclusion</b>	<b>Oppose</b>
<b>Southcentral Regional Advisory Council Recommendation</b>	<b>Oppose</b>
<b>Interagency Staff Committee Comments</b>	<p>The Interagency Staff Committee found the staff analysis to be a thorough and accurate evaluation of the proposal and that it provides sufficient basis for the Regional Council recommendation and Federal Subsistence Board action on the proposal.</p>
<b>ADF&amp;G Comments</b>	<b>Oppose</b>
<b>Written Public</b>	<b>None</b>

## WP16–15 Executive Summary

Comments	
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## STAFF ANALYSIS

### WP16-15

#### Issues

Proposal WP16-15, submitted by the Hope Village Council, requests that the harvest quota for caribou in a portion of Unit 7 be increased from five caribou to ten caribou with five animals for the community of Hope and five for the community of Cooper Landing by Federal registration permit.

#### Discussion

The proponent states that Federally qualified subsistence users from Cooper Landing harvested the entire Federal subsistence quota of caribou on the first day of the 2014 season, eliminating any opportunity for Federally qualified subsistence users from Hope to harvest caribou. The proponent believed the regulation should be changed to assure that Federally qualified subsistence users in both Hope and Cooper Landing have an equal opportunity to harvest caribou.

#### Existing Federal Regulation

##### Unit 7- Caribou

<i>Unit 7 – north of the Sterling Highway and west of the Seward Highway – 1 caribou by Federal registration permit only. The Seward District Ranger will close the Federal season when 5 caribou are harvested by Federal registration permit.</i>	<i>Aug. 10 – Dec. 31</i>
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<i>Unit 7 remainder</i>	<i>No open season</i>
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#### Proposed Federal Regulation

##### Unit 7- Caribou

<i>Unit 7 – north of the Sterling Highway and west of the Seward Highway – 1 caribou by Federal registration permit only. The Seward District Ranger will close the Federal season when 5 caribou are harvested by <del>Federal registration permit</del> <b>Hope subsistence users and 5 caribou are harvested by Cooper Landing subsistence users by Federal registration permit.</b></i>	<i>Aug. 10 – Dec. 31</i>
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*Unit 7 remainder*

*No open season*

## Existing State Regulation

### Unit 7 – Caribou

*Unit 7 – north of the  
Sterling Highway  
and west of the  
Seward Highway*

*Residents and  
Nonresidents: one  
caribou by permit*

*DC001*

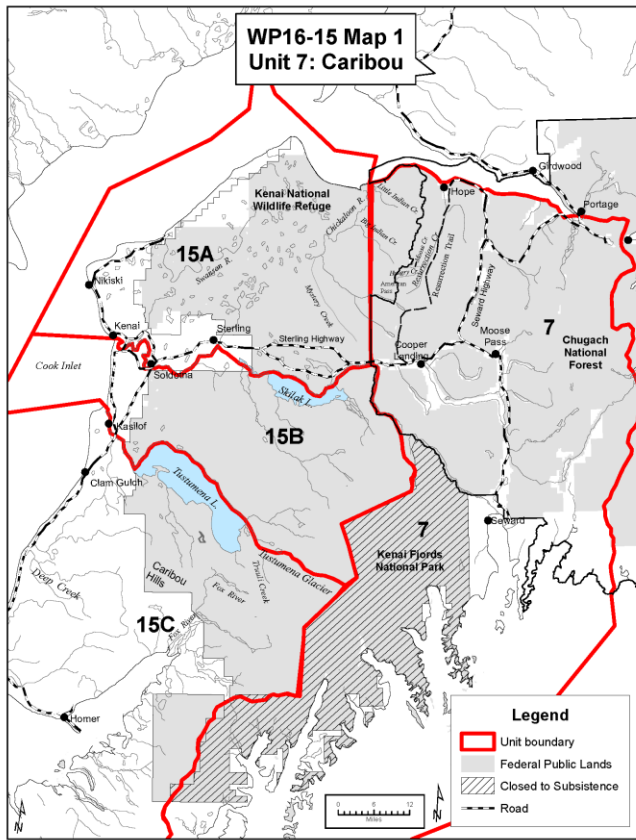
*Aug. 10 – Dec. 31*

*Unit 7 remainder*

*No open season*

## Extent of Federal Public Lands

Federal public lands comprise approximately 78% of Unit 7 and consists of 50% U.S. Forest Service (USFS) managed lands, 23% National Park Service (NPS) managed lands, and 5% U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) managed lands (**Map 1**).



## **Customary and Traditional Use Determination**

Residents of Cooper Landing and Hope have a customary and traditional use determination to harvest caribou in Unit 7.

## **Regulatory History**

In 2010, the Federal Subsistence Board (Board) adopted Proposal WP10-32a, which established a customary and traditional use determination for caribou in Unit 7 for the communities of Hope and Sunrise. Only Hope is specified in regulation as having a customary and traditional use determination, because Sunrise is considered a “subcommunity” of Hope (Matuskowitz 2015, pers. comm.). Board action on Proposal WP10-32b, established a Federal subsistence hunting season of August 10 to December 31 and registration permit with a harvest quota of five caribou.

In 2014, the Board adopted Proposal WP14-08 which added the community of Cooper Landing to the customary and traditional use determination for caribou in Unit 7.

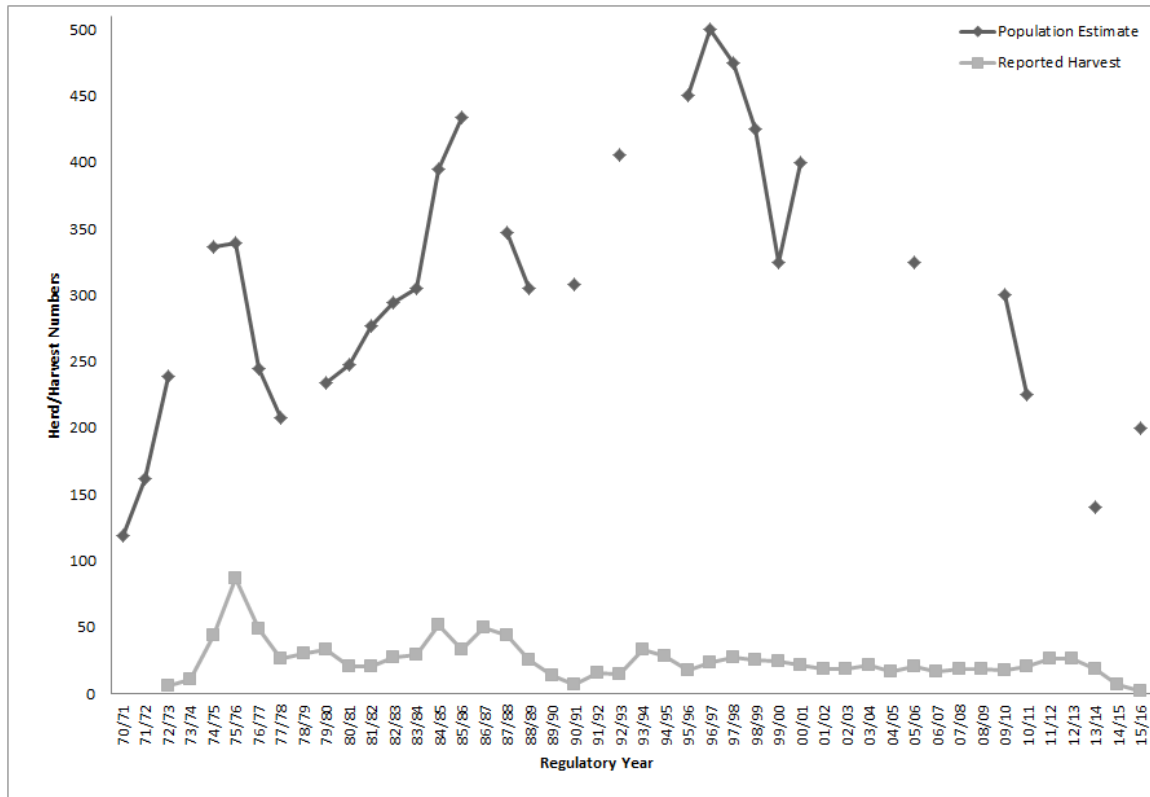
The State has required successful drawing permit hunters to report within 10 days of harvest, and unsuccessful hunters to report within 15 days of the season end (ADF&G 2009). Based on 2014 registration permit stipulations, Federally qualified subsistence users have been required to call in to report within 48 hours and send in their permit cards within 20 days.

## **Current Events**

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and FWS staff completed a caribou survey on November 4, 2015. Jeff Selinger (2015b, pers. comm.) stated that the 2015 population estimate for the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd was 200 animals.

## **Biological Background**

Caribou were extirpated on the Kenai Peninsula by 1912 or 1913 (Lutz 1956, Spencer and Hakala 1964). Caribou transplants were later conducted on the Kenai Peninsula by ADF&G with funds provided by the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, 16 U.S.C. §669-669i (Burris and McKnight 1973). In 1965, 15 animals (3 bulls and 12 cows) from the Nelchina Caribou Herd were released at Chickaloon River and Mystery Creek (Burris and McKnight 1973; ADF&G, USFS and USFWS 1994). In 1966, 29 more Nelchina caribou (3 bulls and 26 cows) were released near Sterling (Burris and McKnight 1973; ADF&G, USFS and USFWS 1994). Some of the caribou from one or both of these releases migrated to the high country to colonize the northern portion of the Kenai Mountains in Unit 7, while others colonized a portion of the lowlands in Unit 15A.



**Figure 1.** Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd population estimates and reported harvests from regulatory year 1970/71 to present (ADF&G, USFS and USFWS 2003, Selinger 2009 and 2013, McDonough 2011, Selinger 2015a&b, pers. comm., Selinger 2016, pers. comm., OSM 2016 and Delfrate 2016, pers. comm.). Average population estimates are shown for regulatory years 1972/73, 1976/77 and 2013/14 when two population surveys were flown.

ADF&G conducted aerial surveys to determine the number, distribution, and composition of the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd. This herd grew to 339 animals in 1975 (Selinger 2005). The herd's population estimate ranged from 120-500 caribou from 1995 to 2015 (**Figure 1**). The early winter count in 2013 (Dec. 3) was 130 with a herd population estimate of 130-150 animals (There were poor light conditions on this survey and some animals may have been missed.). A second count that same winter on Feb. 5 was 120 with a herd population estimate of 120-130 animals (Selinger 2015a, pers. comm.; Delfrate 2016, pers. comm.). The State has a management objective/direction of 300-400 animals for the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd (Selinger 2009).

Calf:cow ratios ranged from 20-34 calves:100 cows between 1985 and 1996 (Selinger 2003; ADF&G, USFS and USFWS 1994). During this same period, the bull:cow ratio ranged from 37-44 bulls:100 cows (Selinger 2005; ADF&G, USFS and USFWS 1994). Ten-month old calf weights decreased each year from 1996-2002 and may have indicated reduced habitat quality. However, calf weights were generally above those from the Nelchina Caribou Herd (McDonough 2011).

Population estimates declined sharply from 2009 to 2014 (**Figure 1**) and have been below State management objectives since 2011. The small size of the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd has been a conservation concern. Small populations lose biological viability (Shaffer 1986, Traill et al. 2009, O'Grady et al. 2006).

### Habitat

The Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd occupies mostly alpine tundra habitat between elevations of approximately 2,000 to 4,500 feet (ADF&G, USFS and USFWS 1994). This herd exhibits strong fidelity to approximately 205 square miles of winter range habitat on the south-facing, windblown ridges of that portion of the Kenai Mountains bordered by American Pass on the south, Little Indian Creek on the north, Big Indian Creek on the west, and Resurrection Creek on the east (**Map 1**) (Selinger 2003; ADF&G, USFS and USFWS 1994). The calving grounds extend from American Pass to the headwaters of Big Indian Creek, including the headwaters of American, Hungry and Moose creeks (**Map 1**; ADF&G, USFS and USFWS 1994). In summer, the herd expands its range to include areas east and south of Resurrection Creek to the Seward and Sterling highways; the summer range is approximately 560 square miles (Selinger 2003; ADF&G, USFS and USFWS 1994). The herd occupies habitat which is managed almost exclusively by the Chugach National Forest and Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Selinger (2015b, pers. comm.) observed that poor habitat and predation may have contributed to the most recent decline of the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd.

### **Harvest History**

Caribou were harvested by Kenai Peninsula rural residents over 100 years ago, prior to when the original Kenai Peninsula caribou population was extirpated (OSM 2010). With reintroduction of caribou to the Kenai Peninsula 50 years ago, caribou harvest has occurred on the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd since 1972.

Since 1972, annual harvest rates for the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd ranged between about 1% and 20% (**Figure 1**). Harvest rates vary for other Alaska caribou herds. Lenart (2011) reported an annual harvest rate of <2% for the Central Arctic Caribou Herd. For the Chisana Caribou Herd, the recommended harvest strategy is bulls only and not to exceed 2% of the estimated population (Chisana Caribou Herd Working Group 2012). The Chisana caribou herd is several times larger than the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd. Caikoski (2011) reported an annual harvest rate of <2% for the Porcupine Caribou Herd. The reported harvest rates were 2-3% for the Delta Caribou Herd (Seaton 2009) and 3% for the White Mountains Caribou Herd (Seaton 2011). Harvest rates for the Fortymile Caribou Herd were set at 2-3% from 2012-2018, with a 4% harvest if that herd reaches 70,000 animals (Harvest Management Coalition 2012). Dau (2011) reported a harvest rate of 3-4% for the Western Arctic Caribou Herd during the 2009-2010 timeframe. Parrett (2011) reported a harvest rate of 4-5% for the Teshekpuk Caribou Herd. Woolington (2009) reported that during the 1980s and 1990s, the Mulchatna Caribou Herd

harvest rate was sustained at <5%. Tobey and Schwanke (2009) reported that ADF&G had maintained a harvest rate of approximately 7% for the Nelchina Caribou Herd.

From RY1993/94 to 2013/14, the average reported State harvest was 17-29 caribou/year (**Table 1**; ADF&G 2015a). During those years, most people who received a State drawing permit did not hunt, and only 12% of those who received a State drawing permit harvested a caribou. Hunters normally access the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd via long backpacking trips off the Resurrection Trail. Some hunters also access the herd via horse back. Motor vehicle use on this trail is prohibited in fall, thus reducing the number of people who hunt, as well as the harvest success rate. From RY1999/00 to 2005/06, 91% of the harvest occurred in August and September (Selinger 2003 and 2005; McDonough 2007).

The average annual harvest by State drawing permits during the 8-year period from RY2001/02 to 2008/09 was 19 caribou per year (ADF&G 2009). Under Federal subsistence regulations, Federally qualified subsistence users harvested two caribou in RY2010/11, two caribou in 2012/13, four caribou in 2014/15 and one caribou in 2015/16 (OSM 2016). The average annual harvest from State and Federal hunts combined during the 5-year period from RY2010/11 to 2013/14 was 23.2 caribou per year (ADF&G 2015a, OSM 2015). The State has reduced the number of drawing permits the past three years. For 2014, the State reduced the number of drawing permits by 80% (from 250 to 50), with only 3 animals harvested in fall 2014 (Burcham 2015, pers. comm.). For 2015, the State further reduced the number of permits and issued 25 drawing permits, with only one animal harvested in fall 2015 (ADF&G 2015b; Delfrate 2016, pers. comm.). For next fall (RY2016/17), the State requested applications for 25 drawing permits (ADF&G 2015b). While Alaska residents receive most drawing permits, non-residents may also apply for permits.

<b>Table 1.</b> Kenai Mountains caribou harvest in the State DC001 drawing permit hunt RY 1993-2014 (ADF&G 2009, ADF&G 2015a).						
Regulatory	Reported Harvest					
Year	Males	(%)	Females	(%)	Unknown.	Total
1993/94	19	66%	10	33%	0	29
1994/95	17	61%	11	39%	0	28
1995/96	10	56%	8	44%	0	18
1996/97	10	43%	13	57%	0	23
1997/98	12	44%	14	52%	1	27
1998/99	17	68%	8	32%	0	25
1999/00	11	46%	13	54%	0	24
2000/01	15	68%	7	32%	0	22
2001/02	13	68%	6	32%	0	19
2002/03	11	61%	8	39%	0	18
2003/04	14	64%	7	32%	1	22
2004/05	10	59%	7	41%	0	17



2005/06	16	76%	5	24%	0	21
2006/07	10	59%	7	41%	0	17
2007/08	9	47%	9	47%	1	19
2008/09	15	79%	4	21%	0	19
2009/10	13	72%	5	28%	0	18
2010/11	13	68%	6	32%	0	19
2011/12	21	81%	5	19%	0	26
2012/13	12	50%	12	50%	0	24
2013/14	13	68%	6	32%	0	19

### **Other Alternatives Considered**

Deferral of this proposal was considered. Deferral would keep Federal lands open to both Federally qualified and non-Federally qualified subsistence users. While Alaska residents receive most State drawing permits, non-residents may apply for these permits as well. Consideration was also given to authorizing the U.S. Forest Service, Seward District Ranger to issue Federal drawing permits to Federally qualified users from both Hope and Cooper Landing and to set the annual harvest quota for a Federal hunt. This alternative would require an 804 analysis to allocate among Federally qualified subsistence users and was not considered further because of present conservation concerns for the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd.

### **Effects of the Proposal**

If this proposal is adopted, it would double the Unit 7 Federal subsistence harvest quota and would allocate the caribou resource equally between the communities of Hope and Cooper Landing. This would require an 804 analysis. The season would close for the communities of Hope and Cooper Landing when each community harvested five caribou. This does not include harvest by State users. Given the most recent caribou population estimates, adopting Proposal WP16-15 could adversely impact conservation of the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd.

This herd has been below the State's management objective (300-400 animals) since 2011. There are concerns about the biological viability of the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd. Given the decline, this population needs time to recover.

### **OSM CONCLUSION**

**Oppose** Proposal WP16-15.

### **Justification**

Adopting the proposal as submitted would increase the Federal subsistence harvest quota while allowing State harvest to continue. Conservative management is appropriate at this time given the small size of the Kenai Mountains Caribou Herd. This herd has been below ADF&G's

management objectives since 2011, and there are concerns about the biological viability of the population. Although the population increased to 200 animals in November 2015, it is still below the State's management objective of 300-400 animals.

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## **SUBSISTENCE REGIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Southcentral Subsistence Regional Advisory Council**

**Oppose** WP16-15. The herd needs time to recover. The Council opposed WP16-15. Based on the DOI Solicitor's advice, the SCRAC recommendation made at October, 2015 meeting to modify the proposal to close Federal Public Lands (as originally suggested in the OSM preliminary conclusion) was actually beyond the scope possible actions. It will be better to look at a new proposal once the herd is healthier.

### **INTERAGENCY STAFF COMMITTEE COMMENTS**

The Interagency Staff Committee found the staff analysis to be a thorough and accurate evaluation of the proposal and that it provides sufficient basis for the Regional Council recommendation and Federal Subsistence Board action on the proposal.